DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 086 EA 009 498

AUTHOR Down, A. Graham
TITLE The Future of the Back-to-Basics Movement.
PUB DATE 26 Mar 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (37th, Houston, Texas, March 26-29, 1977); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Alternative Schools; *Basic Skills; *Educational Alternatives; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Graduation Requirements; *Performance Based Education
IDENTIFIERS *Back to Basics

ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most dramatic hallmark of the so-called back-to-basics movement is the growth in many communities across the country of the basic alternative elementary school. Another example of the back-to-basics movement is the current interest in writing proficiency standards into the high school diploma. Another aspect of this movement is the current reevaluation of the curricular innovations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The growth of consumerism is another facet of the movement. The public is beginning to ask why school costs are escalating far in excess of the general rate of inflation, and school boards are beginning to ask school administrators tough questions about teacher and student performance. It is, of course, easier to identify the hallmarks of a movement than to explain its causes. However, without the flow of statistical information on declining test scores that is barraging the public consciousness, it is doubtful whether the back-to-basics movement would have gained such momentum. The back-to-basics movement is more than nostalgia. It suggests a concern for priorities, which, if not taken to extremes, is legitimate and clearly identifiable. (Author/JG)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED139086

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Remarks by

A. GRAHAM DOWN

Executive Director
Council for Basic Education
Washington, D.C.

"THE FUTURE OF THE BACK-TO-BASICS MOVEMENT"

Annual Convention
National School Boards Association
Houston, Texas
March 26, 1977

EA 009 498

"THE FUTURE OF THE BACK-TO-BASICS MOVEMENT"

I am delighted to have this opportunity of speaking at the national convention of such a distinguished organization. The Council for Basic Education and the National School Boards Association have many things in common, not the least of which is our concern to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the elementary and secondary schools of our country. While it may be easier to measure the depth of a book-case or the size of a swimming pool, or even the size of an optimum budget, I am sure that this audience will agree with me that the central questions of education refer to the quality of instruction, rather than to the myriad legitimate but essentially ancillary questions relating to management and non-curriculum services.

With this in mind, it will hardly be a matter of surprise to you that the Council for Basic Education, 21 years old this year, has always been concerned that schools should operate primarily as centers of learning and not as laboratories of socialization. We have said over the years that all students except the severely retarded deserve quality instruction in all the basic subjects of the curriculum and that, to this end, teachers should enjoy both by temperament and aptitude the capacity to bring this about. Further, within the essentialists' frame of reference that some subjects are more important than others, English, mathematics, foreign languages, sciences, history, geography, government, and the arts all fall within this central core of essentiality. When this job is done, it is not inappropriate to provide quality vocational education for some students. But those who can go further should certainly do so, to the end that academic standards for everybody are

/raised

raised and that the high school diploma should represent some predetermined standard of academic accomplishment rather than the mark of 12 years of social promotion. To repeat myself, the Council has never limited the basics to the Three R's, nor have we assumed that only the privileged are capable of reaching a satisfactory level of accomplishment in the basic subjects.

What are some of the hallmarks of this so-called back-to-basics movement? (I would rather refer to it as "forward-to-basics" because surely schools have never completely left the basic subjects. Moreover, the backward look savors of nostalgia for the pot-bellied stove of the last century rather than the indispensable realities of the essential skills needed of every citizen in this last quarter of the 20th century.) Perhaps the most dramatic is the growth in many communities across the country of the basic alternative elementary school. I have visited some of these schools and, shorn of their extra-curricular extremes (I am referring to the exaggerated dress and discipline codes in some of these schools), they all embody the kind of structured curriculum which the Council espouses. Accountability both of teacher and student is built into their expectations. More time is spent on English and the other basic subjects than in many comparable schools. While all satisfy local judicial mandates as to ethnic mix and faculty-student ratio, to say nothing of using the same teaching materials in many cases as the so-called "conventional" schools, their sense of purpose and mission is such as to ensure far greater standards of academic accomplishment than the regular schools, at least as measured by standardized tests. Of course they enjoy the advantage of choice. People opt to send their children to them. But their success

/seems to

seems to be more striking than their open-space counterparts, and more and more communities are anxious to establish such schools. In Philadelphia, for instance, 17 such schools were established last September.

Another example of the so-called back-to-basics movement is the current interest in proficiency standards being written into the high school diploma. Not so long ago Arizona was the only state to have such standards, and theirs was only for reading. But now, following the Oregon precedent, one state after another is getting onto the competency-based band-wagon with the same kind of concern for measurement and assessment which characterizes the evaluation of student performance in the basic alternative elementary schools. There are, of course, dangers in this movement. Standardized tests, as we pointed out in our occasional paper on testing, are no educational panacea. Some are better than others. Their very existence can encourage some teachers to teach to the test or to develop various kinds of teaching how to take tests. Most of these efforts are of dubious merit. However, particularly where the assessment used requires the student to demonstrate his ability in writing, achievement tests of one sort or other can be used advantageously to measure accomplishment in the area of basic academic proficiency. Oregon may not be a particularly good precedent. By trying to measure driver training, personal adaptability and accomplishment in English all at the same time (to take just three examples from its laundry list) and allowing considerable local option and variation in what is mandatory -- this "everything but the kitchen sink" variety of doing business is of dubious service to most students. Rather, states should be encouraged to do as New York State appears to be doing, to start from a narrow

/curricular

curricular base and thereafter expand the number of subjects measured by assessment procedures.

Another aspect of this movement is the current reevaluation of the curricular innovations of the late 60's and early 70's. The latest report released by the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto, California, seems to suggest that most of these innovations did not work if for no other reason than that the in-service teacher training so essential to new techniques in teaching strategies was either insufficient or in some cases non-existent. Already many of the elementary school new mathematics programs have been revised in the direction of emphasizing computational skills and away from the more theoretical concepts . . . the new math. Various approaches to phonics are gaining ground at the expense of the whole-word method in elementary reading. New emphasis is being given to writing and formal grammar. Mini-courses in "relevant" subjects seem to be fewer in number. Curriculum design is more sequential and less variegated. Distribution requirements are being revived in both schools and colleges.

The growth of consumerism is another facet of this movement. The public is beginning to ask why it is that, at the same time student enrollments are either only holding their own or more frequently declining, costs are escalating far in excess of the general rate of inflation. School boards are beginning to ask school administrators, who in the immediate post-World War II period pretty well had it very much their own way, tough questions about teacher and student performance. While it is still difficult to prove teacher incompetence, at least as grounds for dismissal, nevertheless the growth of the kinds of advisory councils recommended by the NCCE, the textbook controversies

/which have

which have been characteristic of both West Virginia and other areas of the country, the increasing sophistication on the part of the interested public to participate in the arena of collective bargaining -- all of these suggest that the public is anxious to reassert its notion about priorities and the basics. The identification of Jesse Jackson with this educational consumerism is suggestive of the recognition among minority groups that black English is not good enough in a world ordered by standard English. This point was graphically illustrated in the case of the black high school valedictorian who could not gain admission to George Washington University.

It is, of course, easier to identify the hallmarks of a movement than to explain its causes. However, one apparent cause above all others bears some analysis. Without the flow of statistical information which is barraging the public consciousness from all sides, it is doubtful whether the back-to-basics movement would have gained such momentum. The public's concerns over the decline of the SAT scores may be exaggerated. After all, CBE was the first national organization to point out that scores on the PSAT tests, which are drawn from the same item bank, have not declined and that, although the decline is real, the motivation to excel on a test like this in a buyers' market is not so intense as it was when places in colleges were harder to come by. Whatever the cause for the decline in performance in a test which the College Board and ETS insist is psychometrically reliable and is an accurate predictor of the grade-point average at the end of the freshman year for at least two out of three people, the public blames this decline on the ineffectiveness of instruction in our schools. More cogent are the findings of the National Assessment for Education Progress, an organization which reports that in the basic subjects progress has been negligible in the last few years (except for

minority youngsters in the earlier grades) and in some areas academic achievement appears to have declined. The recently released Hudson Institute report painted the same gloomy picture. The public is demanding the release by local school districts of a whole variety of test scores -- incomplete measures, perhaps, of the efficacy of a school, but cogent enough to make the demand for teaching and learning proficiency at an all-time high, especially in the light of Office of Education reports which speak of a large number of functionally illiterate adults.

Historians should not speculate. As a former teacher of history, I may be forgiven, I trust. But it does seem to me that with all the interest in a simpler life (albeit that Chevettes have not sold as well as expected), the back-to-basics movement is more than nostalgia. It suggests a concern for priorities which, if not taken to extremes, is legitimate and clearly identifiable. Because the flow of information referred to above is so extensive, because the media's influence is increasing almost daily, because we live in a society impressed by statistics, the chances of this movement's eroding are slim. I don't happen to agree with Fred Hechinger when he states, "The back-to-basics movement will kill itself because of its extremes." On the contrary, the public as the sovereign element in our public school system has a right to demand, and, more importantly, to get more. The omens are good. Teacher education appears to be improving. The concern by government agencies such as NEH to improve the quality of literacy of the professionals, the renewed interest in subject matter, the premium placed on teacher competence by the over-supply of professionals in the field, the revival of liberal education in the colleges, the concern among the proponents of career education that career education promote basic skills, the increasing recognition among school boards

/that these

that these skills transcend the exponential rate of change in our technological society -- all these suggest that, as I stated in my annual report, there are "grounds for cautious hope." As Edward Fiske wrote recently in The New York Times, "A new academic seriousness has characterized students." Grade inflation is declining. Moreover, fiscal constraint can be a remarkably strong incentive in this process of establishing priorities. Clifton Fadiman once wrote, "There is an intimate relationship between a healthy democracy and the ideal of excellence in education." Let me conclude by hoping that a commitment to sound learning is not an ephemeral fad, but a permanent hallmark of this country's reordering of its priorities in this post-bicentennial year.